



# A generative perspective on semi-lexicality

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# What is considered “semi-lexical”?

- *Simplistic view of categories.* All words can be classified as a member of a lexical category (e.g. noun, verb, adjective) or a functional category (e.g. T(ense), D(eterminer)).
- *Reality.* Many words sit on the fringe of canonical/prototypical categories.
- Semi-lexical: both “lexical” and “functional”; alternatively “hybrid categories”

(Various works: Ross 1972; Emonds 1985; van Riemsdijk 1998; Corver & van Riemsdijk 2001; Alexiadou, Haegeman, & Stavrou 2008, etc.)

- Example: quantificational pseudopartitives (What is ‘bunch’?):
  - (1) A bunch of flowers were lying on the table. (= many flowers)
  - (2) A bunch of flowers was in the vase. (= a bouquet of flowers)

# Dealing with semi-lexicity

Options:

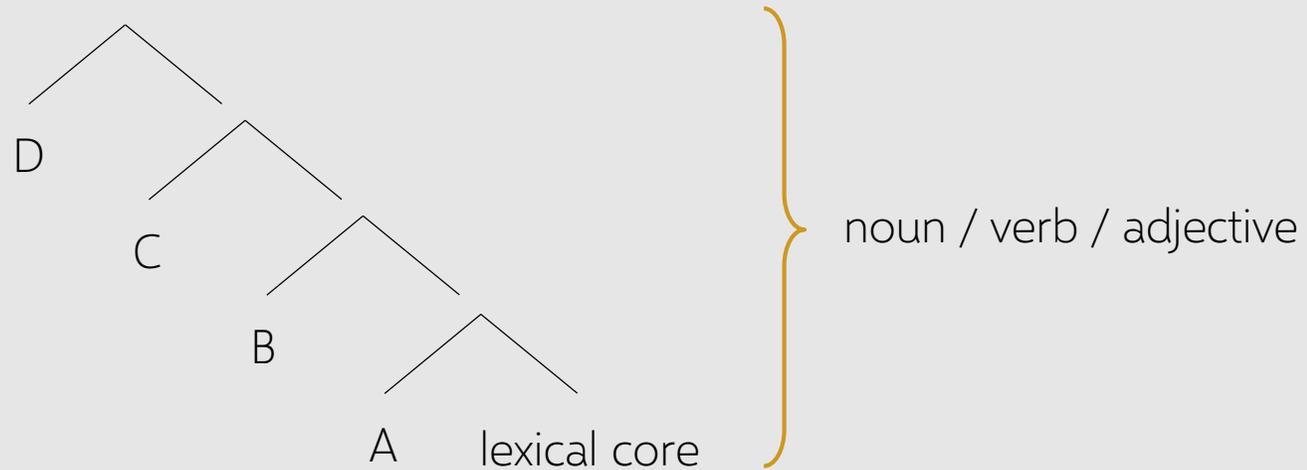
- Ignore it. (*Useless*)
- Take “semi-lexical” to be a third supra-category alongside lexical and functional  
(*But, this doesn't capture the likeness of semi-lexical elements to existing categories and it predicts at least some uniformity among semi-lexical elements, e.g. categories within the semi-lexical category*)
- Decompose our existing notions of categories to give us a more nuanced view of what it means to be lexical, functional, or semi-lexical...
- (There are other alternatives out there, but I won't address them here.)

# Categories

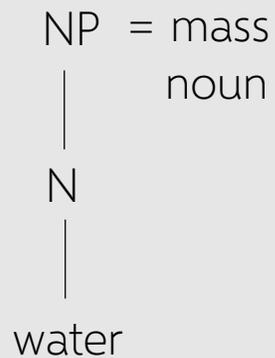
- In earlier stages of the theory, **words** were categorized:
  - *books* = noun (= lexical)
  - *walked* = verb (= lexical)
  - *smarter* = adjective (= lexical)
- In later stages, **pieces of words** (= morphemes) are categorized:
  - *books* = *book+s* = noun (N) + number (Num) (= lexical + functional)
  - *walked* = *walk+ed* = verb (V) + tense (T) (= lexical + functional)
  - *smarter* = *smart+er* = adjective (A) + comparative (Cmpr) (= lexical + functional)
- Some theories (e.g. nanosyntax) identify pieces smaller than the morpheme (= features):
  - Some prepositions (Pantcheva 2011): [ Source [ Goal [ Place [ *nominal argument* ] ] ] ]

# Down to the smallest pieces

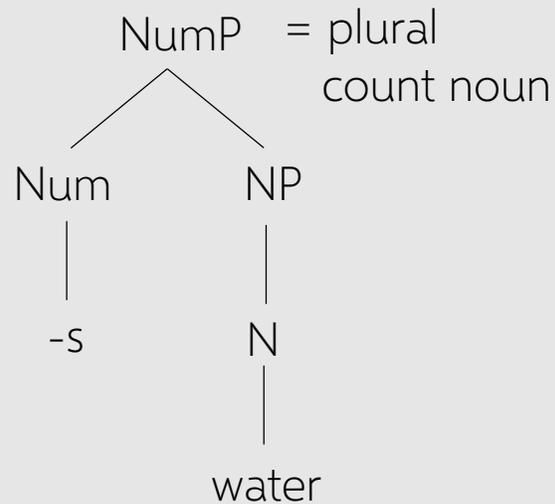
- General trend of decomposing categories (down to roots and features/heads)
- Result: A word may consist of a lexical core (the thing we consider to be the noun, verb, or adjective) and a number of features/morphemes/heads which assign it additional grammatical properties (number, tense, etc.).



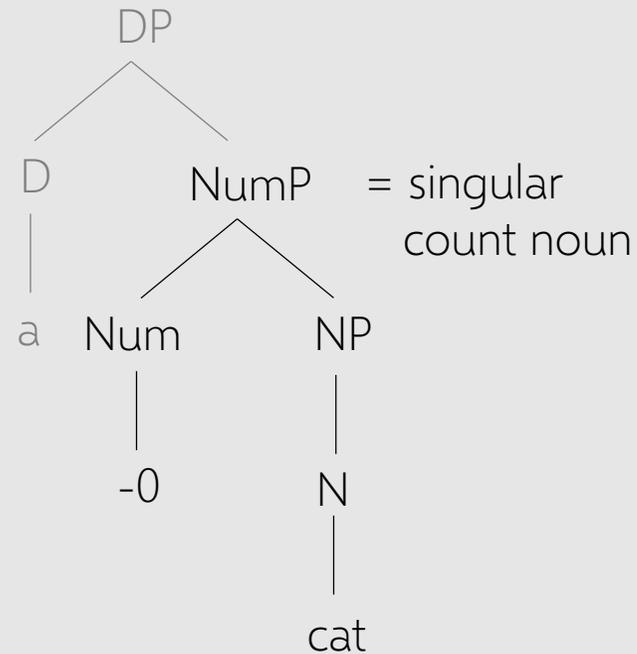
# Decomposing nouns (an example)



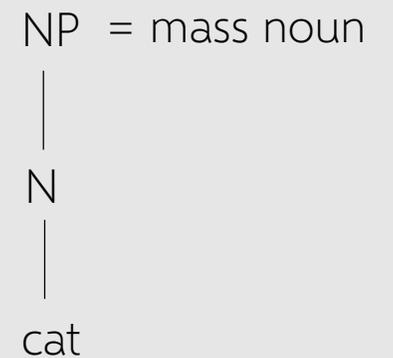
*I saw water.*



*I bought waters.*



*I saw a cat.*



*I saw cat (on the road).  
or That's a lot of cat!*

# Decomposition & semi-lexicality

- “Lexical” categories (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives) typically occur with particular features (in a particular order), e.g. number with nouns, tense with verbs (and in some theories, categorizing heads like *n*, *a*, and *v*, which make an item “nominal,” “adjectival,” or “verbal”).
- The presence/absence of features in a structure affects the morphosyntax of an item (e.g. count syntax vs. mass syntax).
- Certain structures will be canonical or prototypical for a certain category (e.g. nouns usually allow a determiner in their structure).
- Semi-lexicality: Deviations from the “normal” syntactic structure which affect the morphosyntax of an item. The more a structure deviates from a canonical or prototypical category, the more it may appear to be semi-lexical or hybrid.

# An example from Polish

(3) %Ten tysiąc krzesel rozbił się.  
 DEM<sub>M.SG</sub> 1000<sub>M</sub> chairs<sub>N.PL.GEN</sub> broke<sub>M.SG</sub>  
 'Those 1000 chairs broke.'

*Full agreement with numeral (M.SG)*

- Full agreement: Numeral is M.SG or NV.PL and controls agreement.

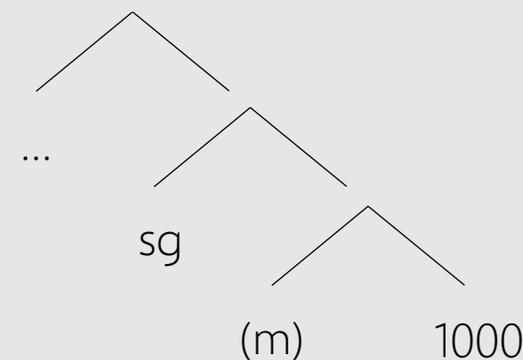
(4) Te tysiąc krzesel rozbiło się.  
 DEM<sub>NV.PL</sub> 1000 chairs<sub>N.PL.GEN</sub> broke<sub>N.SG</sub>  
 'Those 1000 chairs broke.'

*Default agreement forms*

- Default agreement: Numeral is SG or PL only (no gender) and verbal agreement fails.

(5) Tysiące krzesel rozbiło / rozbiły się.  
 1000s chairs<sub>N.PL.GEN</sub> broke<sub>N.SG</sub> / broke<sub>NV.PL</sub>  
 'Thousands of chairs broke.'

"Normally", nouns have gender; the absence of gender creates a semi-lexical effect!



# Summarizing

- Categories are not primitives per se, but instead represent a constellation of features or heads in a syntactic structure.
- Semi-lexical elements differ from canonical categories in their representation (Missing features? Additional features? Where the item is inserted?).
- This can further affect other grammatical processes (e.g. agreement).
- Semi-lexicality comes down to where an item is positioned in a structure, what items occur around it, and how it interacts with additional pieces of structure or grammatical processes.